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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 000188

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: ETHNIC ALBANIAN POLITICS IN FERMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Reeker for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ethnic Albanian politicians increasingly believe PM Gruevski's government is not committed to their top goal: Euro-Atlantic integration. Largest e-Albanian party and coalition partner DUI is struggling with how to push Gruevski to solve the name issue (thus opening the door to NATO and the EU) and whether to even remain in government.

Intra-Albanian politics are more complex than ever and no other clear choice for an e-Albanian coalition partner exists. The outcome could be that Gruevski carries on without an e-Albanian partner, not a good sign for interethnic relations. End summary.

¶2. (C) Post-election conversations with a range of ethnic-Albanian political leaders reveal deep concerns about Macedonia's immediate future, and in particular the ruling VMRO party's almost complete control over nearly all political institutions and -- according to most e-Albanians -- PM Gruevski's apparent disinterest in finding a solution to the name issue with Greece in order to pave the way toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

DUI: Troubled and Torn

¶3. (C) The largest e-Albanian party DUI, VMRO's coalition partner, is acutely troubled. DUI leader Ali Ahmeti and, separately and more directly, party VP Teuta Arifi both told the Ambassador within the past week that they are deeply concerned about how to continue as VMRO's coalition partner without any progress on the name nor any sense that DUI is a genuine coalition partner. Ahmeti pointed out the contradiction that some e-Albanians criticize DUI for partnering with VMRO, yet VMRO treats DUI almost like opposition within the government.

¶4. (C) Arifi assessed that DUI's position as VMRO's partner would quickly become untenable without an immediate signal that Gruevski planned to move on Euro-Atlantic integration, i.e. the name issue. Thus far, DUI has remained silent on the issue to give Gruevski room to work and so that the e-Albanian community would not be tagged by e-Macedonians as betraying the country. Thus Arifi asked the Ambassador directly how much pressure the U.S. was prepared to bring on Gruevski to solve the name issue as soon as possible. The Ambassador responded that we have made clear to Gruevski that he needs to signal a willingness to negotiate seriously.

¶5. (C) Arifi admitted that leaving the coalition would be a real blow to DUI: As the largest e-Albanian party (wounded as it was by significant losses in the municipal elections), DUI's rightful place is in government. The alternatives -- Menduh Thaci's DPA, Imer Selmani's New Democracy (ND), or no e-Albanian partner at all -- are all distasteful to DUI. Additionally, Arifi acknowledged the risk that agitating on the name would be dangerous for any e-Albanian party. Seeking someone to blame on the name issue and with a fragmented opposition and President Crvenkovski now out of office, Gruevski could easily pick on DUI. This could in

turn ramp up interethnic tensions.

New Democracy: Who Are You?

16. (C) In an April 8 meeting with Selmani, he echoed many of the same concerns: with VMRO in total control, no movement on the name issue, the worldwide slowdown hitting an economy already slow to transition, plus tensions over issues such as the GoM's plan to build a large church in Skopje's city square, e-Albanians will become significantly more frustrated. He believed the country was inherently more stable than in 2001, but also worried that Gruevski and VMRO would seek to scapegoat or even intentionally provoke the e-Albanian community for short-term political gain.

17. (C) For his part, Selmani is still searching for an identity for his party. He won about 15% of the vote for president, or about 150,000 votes. Of those votes, about 50,000 came from non-Albanians including many e-Macedonians; this is unprecedented for an e-Albanian politician. If ND were to get this many votes in a parliamentary election, Selmani estimated that would come to 20 seats, or more than DUI holds now. However, ND fared much less well in municipal elections, narrowly winning only one municipality, Aracinovo. Selmani is struggling with a simple dilemma: if he builds a truly multi-ethnic party in an effort to keep drawing e-Macedonian votes, this could alienate e-Albanian voters. If ND remains more or less exclusively e-Albanian, he will likely struggle to retain the non-Albanian votes he got in March, many of which were likely protest votes against VMRO's Gjorge Ivanov and SDSM's Ljubomir Frckoski. We learned

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recently that, through IRI, ND has retained the services of an American political consultant (and former State DAS), who has also recently worked for VMRO (and indeed has a long history with VMRO, dating to his time as IRI representative in the late 1990s).

Osmani: Rising Star

18. (C) All the e-Albanian parties are looking in the rear-view mirror at Rupi Osmani, the fiery former mayor of Gostivar who won the post again on April 5 after a ten-year absence from politics. Ahmeti is dismissive of Osmani, but Osmani's easy win over DUI incumbent Nevzat Bejta, even after Ahmeti personally invested much of his time campaigning there, is widely seen as a sign of both Osmani's ascendance and DUI's vulnerability. Osmani plans to create yet another party, and confidently told us during the campaign that he will overtake DUI and the others in a few short years.

19. (C) Gruevski is also likely wary of Osmani, a more confrontational e-Albanian politician who made his name in 1997 for hoisting the Albanian flag in Gostivar in defiance of the government. After a standoff, then-PM Branko Crvenkovski sent in the troops in an operation that killed three people and led to many arrests, including of Osmani, who was sentenced to 13 years in prison but pardoned and released after 18 months. DUI's Arifi told us that given Osmani's martyr status his victory in Gostivar was more or less pre-ordained, but she predicted that he will fail as a mayor and will not be able to maintain his political momentum. Osmani told us that he and Gruevski have had some cordial telephone conversations, and he may even have to make a coalition with VMRO on the Gostivar municipal council. Nevertheless, we do not anticipate that Gruevski will be eager to provide much in the way of funding or services for Gostivar, which will in turn hurt Osmani's political chances.

DPA: Hanging In

110. (C) Through its win in Tetovo, DPA remains alive, if on

life support. In his conversation with us, Thaci was gleeful that ND (which broke off from DPA last year) did not perform especially well in the municipal elections. But DPA still remains relatively unpopular among many e-Albanians nationwide; it is largely believed that DPA mayoral candidate Sadi Bexheti won in Tetovo largely by garnering the strong majority of e-Macedonian votes in the ethnically-mixed urban areas of the municipality. While Thaci kept his thugs largely at bay in these elections -- in contrast to the chaos and fear they created in 2008 -- he still earned few points by boycotting leaders' meetings called by Gruevski and making countless baseless or wildly exaggerated claims of police "abuse" or other irregularities on both election days. (We know, we checked.)

Comment: No One in the Wings

11. (C) DUI, DPA, ND, and Osmani will compete hard in the coming years to be the e-Albanian community's standard-bearer. None will likely succeed. VMRO may see a politically fragmented e-Albanian community as being in its interest. DUI is on a downward trajectory and is stuck in an unhappy marriage with VMRO. Should they divorce, DUI will lose the trappings of power and the patronage advantage it has over the other parties. It is unlikely DPA or ND would want to join a VMRO government, at least not without driving a hard bargain. Thaci has a poor relationship with Gruevski, who does not trust Thaci after a friction-filled two years as coalition partners from 2006-2008. Many suspect, perhaps with some reason, that ND is in part a VMRO creation, and Selmani wants to keep some public space between himself and Gruevski. ND would likely lose faith among many e-Albanians by joining a VMRO government. Osmani is not an option: he has no party structure, no seats in parliament, and likely no real interest in working with Gruevski. Should DUI leave the government, the possible outcome would be that VMRO would continue without an e-Albanian partner. This would be an unwelcome precedent and likely not good for interethnic relations.
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